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ABSTRACT

The factors leading to positive outcomes in vocational education and training (VET) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were examined through person-to-person and telephone interviews with indigenous Australian students and VET providers. The interviews focused on the following: the range of VET provision and the extent of its variation in urban, regional, rural, and remote contexts; students' concerns regarding course access, design, and delivery; typical pathways taken to VET by indigenous Australian people; and language and literacy issues in the delivery of VET and their relation to culturally relevant course design and delivery. It was concluded that many factors affect outcomes of participation and that these factors must be viewed as part of a "human system" of delivery. Language and literacy were deemed key to successful outcomes of VET, and the following guiding principles for better course delivery were identified: recognize that education and training is a cultural response; make space for Aboriginality within institutions; involve Aboriginal communities in course delivery; be flexible and negotiate appropriate teaching and learning; recognize that a range of support is needed; make language and literacy part of course delivery; and evaluate the effectiveness of each part of the course delivery system. (MN)

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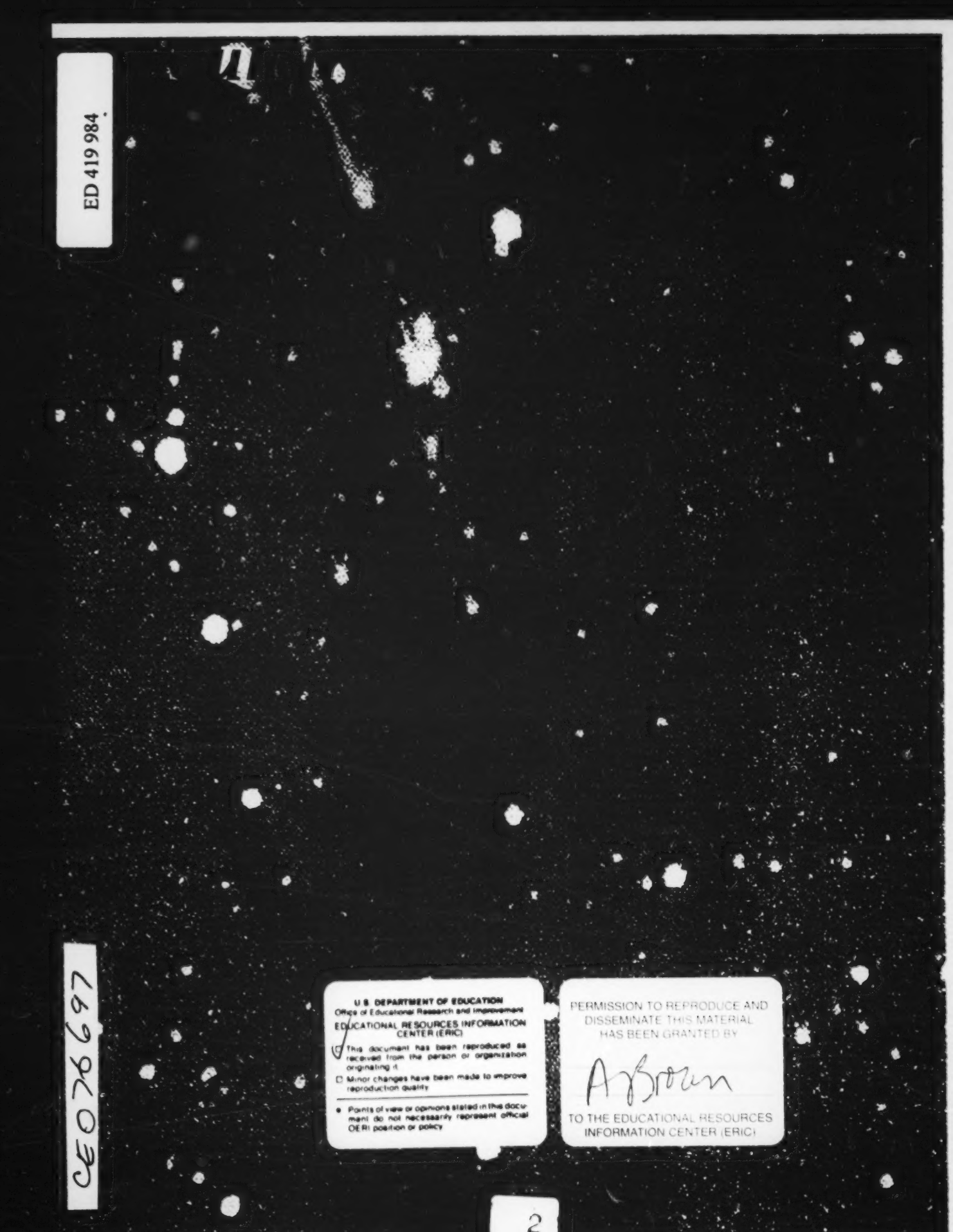

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Culture Matters
Community Report

Reporting on a research project to explore factors affecting the outcomes of vocational education and training for Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander people

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AUSTRALIAN
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Culture Matters

Community Report

Reporting on a research project to explore what factors affect the outcomes of vocational education and training for Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander people

There's an Aboriginal perspective throughout this whole course. It addresses Aboriginal issues and needs by assisting us to be able to work with our community and write about that, and share our knowledge with our peers. The structure suits my needs as an academic and Koori. The block suits my work and groups suit my culture. We feel comfortable with lecturers & coordinators. I know they would be understanding and help us plan around our problems. I've only been in it a little while, but it makes me feel positive I'm going to get a lot out of it. Billy

It made the course so much harder because cultural background wasn't taken into consideration. I found the course very difficult because, in some ways I didn't really know what I was doing. The academic procedures were totally new to me. I had to go over the instructions several times to ensure that I met their deadline. I had no assistance at all, I didn't have any contact. I didn't understand the new kinds of writing. I am not sure if the course could meet my needs. Wilma

The right of access to vocational education and training for indigenous people has been stressed as part of policies in a wide range of areas including education, employment, reconciliation and the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody.

For over twenty years, government policies have urged Australian education and training institutions to respond to the needs of Australian indigenous people. As a result, TAFE colleges and universities have expanded courses and in many cases, courses have acknowledged the culture and identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. These efforts have led to increased access and participation.

However, we need to learn more about what factors 'make a difference'. We are only beginning to understand how to deliver education and training that both affirms the culture of indigenous Australians and which results in quality outcomes especially in regard to employment.

Definition

The outcomes of courses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are many. An 'outcome' is the practical result of a course, for example, getting a job or gaining entry to university or gaining skills to work in the community. The following is a list of some outcomes of participation in vocational education and training referred to in this Report:

Examples of Outcomes

Employment-related outcomes:

The course gave me the skills I needed to get a job
The course gave me promotion in my job
The course gave me what I needed to become permanent staff member
The course improved my job performance
The course helped me meet other Aboriginal workers in the field

Knowledge-related Outcomes

The course increased my skills and knowledge
The course developed my study skills
The course built up my literacy skills
The course taught me to look at the politics of society

Community-related Outcomes

The course gave me counselling skills for work in my community
The course helped us to set up a small business
The course has helped to create work for people
The course has got people here participating in education

Personal and SocialOutcomes:

The course made me stronger made me realise my culture and identity
The course gave me computing skills I need at work
The course gave me the academic skills to get into the course
The course gave me the confidence to go on with study
The course helped me deal with the loss of my parents
The course opened up a new interest for me

Chapter 1 Why was the project needed?

In 1994 the University of Technology, Sydney received funding from Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) for a project to examine the factors which lead to positive outcomes in vocational education and training (VET) for indigenous Australians. The project explored these questions:

> *What factors affect the outcomes of participation for indigenous Australian peoples?*
>
> *What are the implications of a better understanding of these factors for policy and practice?*

The project was carried out by Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training at the university. The research explored both 'cultural issues' and matters of educational quality related to institutional factors. There were four main directions:

- What is the **range of vocational educational and training** (VET) provision, and to what extent does it vary according to urban, regional and rural and remote contexts. To what extent should VET delivery differ according to these contexts?
- What are the **main concerns of students** in areas such as -
  Access and entry requirements
  Course design
  The cultural appropriateness of teaching and learning
  Support and assistance
  Assessment practices
- What are the **typical pathways** taken to vocational education and training by indigenous Australian people? What do these pathways say about the gaps between course outcomes at the early stages and later stages of learning ?
- What are the **main language and literacy issues** in the delivery of VET and how do they relate to the need for a culturally relevant course design and delivery? What recognition is there of the role of Aboriginal languages?

The project team was committed to making contact with indigenous Australian students and coordinators and worked with indigenous Australian researchers to ensure the research was culturally friendly and appropriate. These researchers were past students or community workers with contacts in their communities or networks.

The project was personal and interactive and used person-to-person and telephone interviews to collect information from seventy students and over forty institutions. Only people who had participated in some education or training were interviewed. Interviews with students began with the researcher making a map of the student's educational and life journey:

- where they went to school, their experiences there, when they left;
- the effects of family responsibilities;
- what work or training they had done and how they came to do their most recent course, their experiences the course.

The interviews together present a picture of Aboriginal 'success stories' in education and training. From this perspective the research has been able to talk about what produces positive outcomes.

The interviewers contacting institutions spoke to indigenous Australian people who were running programs or were involved in teaching them. The interviewer explored:

- history and background of the course, its philosophy and approach;
- the involvement of the Aboriginal community
- the different practices and procedures followed in working with indigenous Australians.

When the interviews were completed, the team began to write the report over a number of months. All people interviewed were sent copies of interview notes and draft copies of the report. Researchers came to a workshop to review the research process and comment on the draft report.

What was the thinking at the beginning of the research?

Although there is increasing recognition that vocational and educational training is a cross-cultural experience for Aboriginal peoples there is a lack of information and guidelines on how to use this knowledge to improve courses. By talking to Aboriginal learners, teachers and administrators, the research aimed to come up with such guidelines.

There were some important basic agreements among the research team from the beginning of the project:

- There is a wide range of issues which influence the outcomes of participation for indigenous Australian people including pathways, assessment and support - and they are related to each other;

- It is not enough to look at participation purely in statistical terms, it is crucial to look at what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people say about their experiences;
- Participation can be seen from the perspective of the individual person and their life, as well as from the perspective of the institution and its policies and practices.

Government policies about VET for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have had several themes. These themes (listed below), also influenced the way the researchers thought about the project.

Disadvantage

It is acknowledged that there has been systematic discrimination in the past against indigenous Australian communities, and that there should be a stronger response to their education and training needs

Community consultation

The acknowledgment of Aboriginal culture and identity in course design and delivery by institutions means greater consultation with communities about their education and training needs, and the development of culturally appropriate courses. Institutions should also recognise the need to make links to employment in community development.

Self -determination

The legitimate right of indigenous Australians to take control of Aboriginal decision-making in education and training although accepted, needs to be acted on more effectively. Governments should fund independent Aboriginal education and training providers and develop ways to ensure that publicly funded courses for Aboriginal people are more driven by their vocational education and training needs than by government agendas.

Training reform

Experience has shown that training reforms such as the emphasis on accreditation for courses may have the effect of decreasing access and participation of indigenous Australians, unless steps are taken to develop culturally appropriate courses for indigenous Australians. Pathways from basic to higher levels of qualification and employment must be created.

Diversity

Indigenous Australian peoples and their communities have a wide range of education and training needs. The location of the community, its needs as identified by the community, and the nature of the labour market should all be taken into account.

Chapter 2 What did the researchers do?

The researchers were committed to making sure that indigenous Australian people were able to voice their opinions through the report. With this in mind, the project used a collaborative approach to bring out the meanings that make up the Aboriginal perspective.

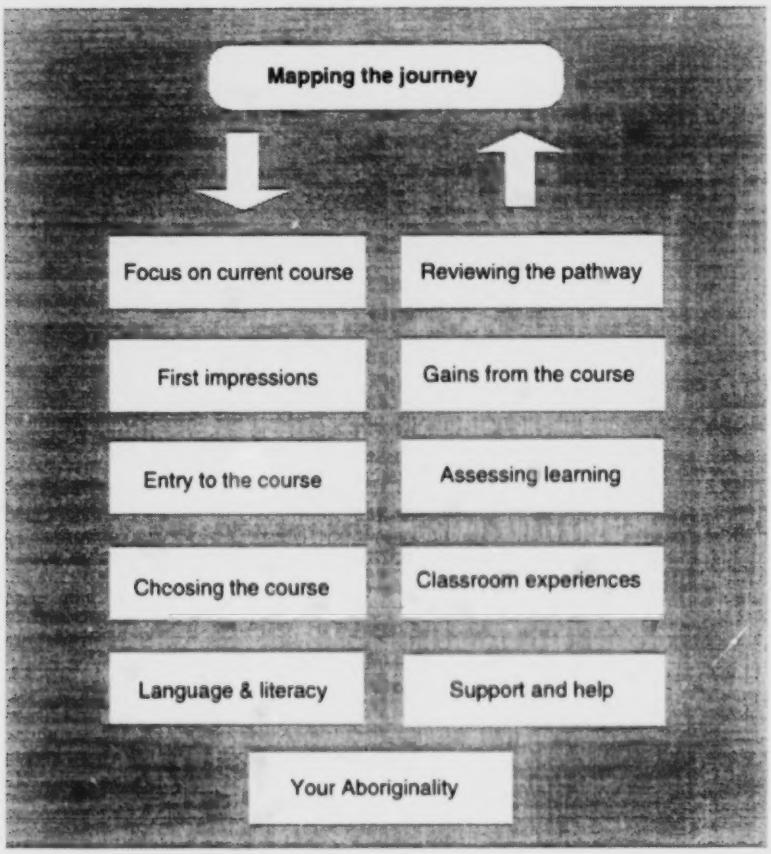
Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal academics worked together in the project. Also, indigenous Australian researchers were employed to collect information using personal and telephone interviews with Aboriginal students and teachers in a range of VET providers. One of the true strengths of the research is the focus on how indigenous Australian people, the participants, *experience the whole range of factors involved with course design and delivery* and the emphasis on exploring how each factor relates to the other to look at the whole 'system'.

Researchers gave the people they interviewed feedback about the report on the learner interviews so they could see how their information had contributed to the reporting of the research. Researchers too, gave feedback to the research team when they finished the interviews and they later workshopped parts of the draft report with the team.

Although the researchers thought about using sample surveys, they decided to use personal interviews. Surveys were felt to be an inappropriate way to explore the views of indigenous Australian teachers and learners. This was for three reasons:

- The long history of non-Aboriginal researchers using Aboriginal people as 'objects for scientific study' who do not need to be consulted about the research
- The survey method can easily distort or silence the voices of indigenous Australian people by restricting the way people can express their opinions
- People would not be prepared to participate in an impersonal survey, as, in the past, such surveys were seen to be forms of surveillance and control.

The Learner Interview



Listening to learners' experiences

The interview was a conversation between the Aboriginal researcher and the student, and covered the learner's educational and life journey, and their pathway into VET. Together they put together a map recording events such as when the person left school, their kind of working life, whether they had worked for government, an Aboriginal community or in business and the kind of courses they had done. Then the interviewer asked questions about the person's experience of a current or recent course including the following:

Choosing your current course

How did you choose your current course? Was there any particular reason such as goals or advice from the community? Did you have any long term goals? Was the course a first choice or second preference?

Getting into the course

How did you get into the course? How did you find out about the course - where was it promoted? What sort of problems did you have and what kind

of support was there to help you? What English language skills or knowledge did you need to get into the course? Was there any English language and literacy assessment? Was the assessment appropriate to your experience?

First impressions of the course

What happened at enrolment, what were you expecting? Were there any Aboriginal people in enrolment? What part did they play? Were you asked to give information about your personal background and skills?

Your Aboriginality and the course

Does the course take into account Aboriginal cultural ways and understandings? How? Is the course dealing with difficulties Aboriginal people experience in academic learning? Does the course allow for different needs such as attendance problems due to common community, family or personal matters?

Talking, reading and writing

What kind of reading and writing tasks were set in the course? What kind of language issues came up for indigenous Australian students? Do the teachers recognise Aboriginal ways of saying things? How? Is there help with study skills provide with the course?

Support and help

What kind of help and support is provided for students and how do they access it? Is there tutorial support? What about literacy support? What would you like to see included in the courses to assist your learning?

What happens in the classroom?

How do you attend the course: once a week or in week long blocks? What style of delivery best suits your style of learning? Do the teaching activities draw on your experience? Have you had any say in the learning activities offered? What about your relationship with the teaching staff?

How is learning assessed

How is your learning assessed? Does the feedback help? Are there more culturally sensitive ways of assessing learning? Are there difficulties with academic writing?

What are you getting from the course?

Has the course helped you achieve personal or community goals? Can you use what you have learned in a useful way at work. Did the outcomes match up with your expectations?

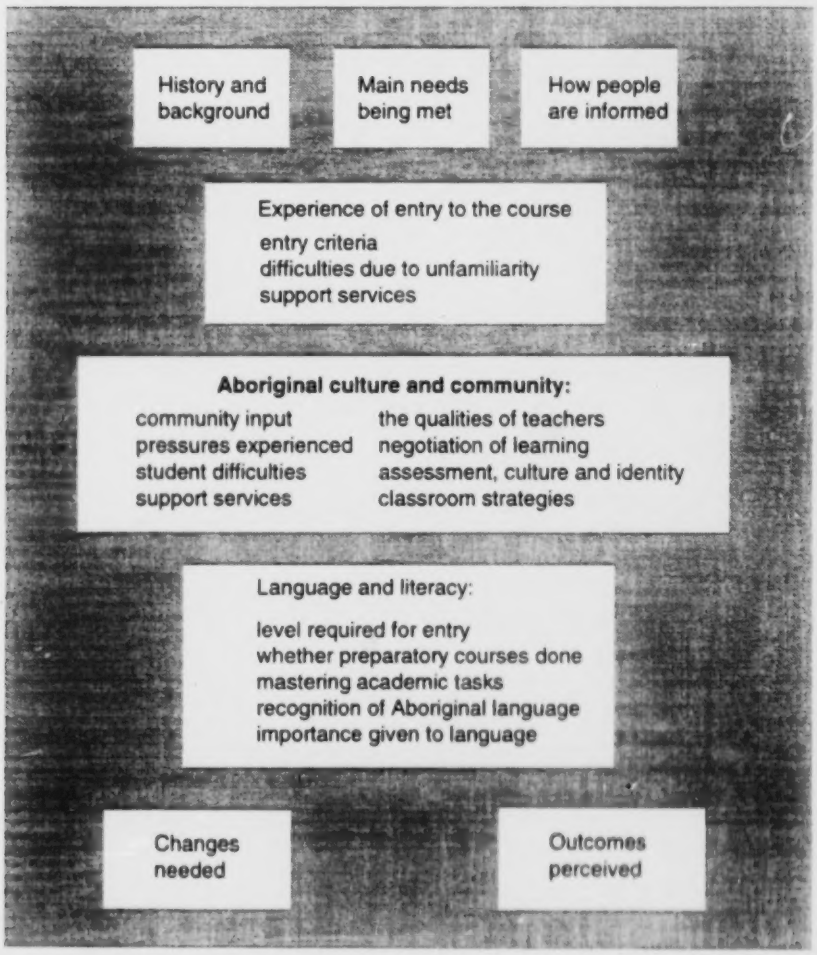
Interviews with Aboriginal people in VET institutions

A number of vocational education and training institutions with significant programs and enrolments were interviewed by telephone. The focus was the course rather than the institution. Consequently course coordinators, or someone involved day-to-day with the students were contacted. The vast majority were indigenous Australians.

The interviewer asked about entry to the course and how students are recruited. An important part of the interview asked how the course responded to Aboriginal needs, how Aboriginal communities were involved in course design and to what degree Aboriginal culture and identity was taken into account. This led to an exploration of language and literacy issues

The interviewees were asked about the kind of changes they would like to see to improve courses.

The Institution Interview



Language, literacy and learning

Both the learner and institution interviews asked about language and literacy. People were asked what skills or what knowledge was required to get into the course and whether or not they had to pass any English language and literacy (ELL) assessment, and, if so, whether the assessment was appropriate to their experience. The interviewer asked whether Aboriginal language skills were recognised and if the course had a specific focus on ELL and the language of learning eg being specific about meanings of words relevant to the course.

The **learner interview** asked if the course dealt with difficulties indigenous Australians were experiencing in academic learning and whether or not they would like literacy included in learning. The interview asked how the learner would like to contribute to the design of the course.

The **institution interview** explored similar issues. Providers were asked if students needed a certain level of proficiency and if so how it was assessed. They were asked whether they thought preparatory courses were effective and how teachers helped students acquire useful academic skills such as essay writing. Teachers were also asked if they considered ELL skills acquisition important; if Aboriginal English was encouraged, and to what extent assessment took into account the language background of the students.

Chapter 3 Pathways: learners' stories

The pathway stories that learners told at the start of their interviews have a lot to tell about how Aboriginal people come into vocational education and training. Overall the stories tell us:

- older people have different experiences from the young because of the times they have lived through
- most of the younger people are experiencing education and training earlier in life
- women are more likely to enter courses through the involvement with the care and schooling of their children.

Some of the typical pathways experienced by Aboriginal people are illustrated in the following stories (the names have been changed).

Firstly, **older people** who are more likely to have done unskilled and casual work, women working as domestics or in nursing roles, and men in labouring or plant operation. They may come to vocational education and training after getting involved in community work and as elders in their community.

Alice was born in north-western NSW and is nearly fifty. She went to the mission school but was excluded from high school because she was Aboriginal. She worked as a domestic in the town and then moved to Sydney where she did factory work and later was married. Moving to the north coast she worked briefly in TAFE and then moved back home to raise her family, doing seasonal work such as cotton chipping for years. She then helped in a women's refuge, doing on the job training and becoming permanent, and assisted at the preschool. At about forty years of age, she started general skills in TAFE and is currently doing her Certificate in Adult Further Education.

Tom grew up on a mission near a coastal town where he went to primary school. After attending high school in the town, he worked briefly as an apprentice painter before joining the railways and doing factory work in Sydney. He then worked as a storeman and fork lift driver for the government department for a number of years before moving back home where he worked in an Aboriginal medical centre, ran a shop and worked as a salesperson before starting a course to train for work in an Aboriginal nursing home, concurrently with a TAFE course. He is currently gaining work experience at the local hospital.

Charlie was born during the war in Sydney and moved around with his family going to various schools. He left school at the end of sixth grade and worked in various casual labouring jobs until his first permanent work in a wool processing plant. He moved to the coast and did farm work, bean picking and carting hay and worked as a handyman at the mission. At the end of the 'sixties he was working in forestry before

moving to jobs with the shire council as a plant operator. Aboriginal 'resettlement' saw the family move to north west NSW before he returned to the coast where he worked with Aboriginal organisations for the next fifteen years. In the same year he became an ATSIC regional councillor, he began basic education with TAFE. He later enrolled in community health, but then went back to vocational preparation gaining his certificate in ABE last year.

Sam is nearly sixty. He grew up in the north-west where he went to Catholic schools, leaving at 16 and entering a carpentry apprenticeship. He qualified and worked for more than twenty years in industry in Broome. He then got involved with the Aboriginal Visitors Scheme (visiting Aboriginal prisoners in gaols) and a new counselling and support service that grew out of this scheme, running counselling workshops. He then started a university bridging course and was then accepted into a degree course in Aboriginal health by block release, which he feels will equip him to work with his people especially in the area of mental health.

Sandra attended Catholic schools in north west WA, leaving at about 13 years of age. She did it hard in hotels, the meatworks and as a domestic. She then moved to Perth for the sake of her children's education, staying and working there as a nursing assistant for many years. At 40 she returned to the north west and worked for several years in alcohol rehabilitation doing workshops and counselling and then for some years in Aboriginal women's refuges. In 1994, at the about fifty, she began her university course in counselling.

Kaye grew up on a mission in the Territory but was taken away as a child too young to remember her family and adopted out in Sydney. After leaving school, she returned to the Territory to find her family, working in domestic jobs in Darwin. After the Cyclone Tracey disaster in 1974 she left town and 'went bush' for the next ten years where she had her children. At the age of forty, she enrolled and completed a one year course at Batchelor College in her main area of interest, arts and crafts.

Ellen went to several primary schools, but then did not attend high school, and received 'home schooling'. At 13 she went to work in a factory. At 15 she became a nursing assistant, sat for the nurses' entrance examination and was trained as a nurse. Later she specialised before moving to Queensland where she continued her nursing studies. As her family grew up, she started voluntary work in schools, but she was not happy with her children's educational experiences. She decided to enrol in university course to see at first hand the workings of the system, enrolling at fifty, a year behind her children in the same course.

Younger people are more likely to have started education and training straight after school. They have been able to benefit earlier in their lives from programs set up specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander people.

Bert is a little over thirty. After attending the mission school and going on to high school, he left at Year 11 when he gained plumbing apprenticeship with the railways. He moved to Sydney and finished the apprenticeship in the public hospital system, after which he went back home. Returning to Sydney, he worked in the civil construction industry for several years before again going home, doing a Skillshare engineering course and going on a job scheme with the local council. At the time of

the research he was doing the tertiary preparation course at TAFE with the idea of bettering his language and writing skills and getting into teaching plumbing at TAFE.

Col is about thirty years of age. He attended five or six schools in various parts of NSW before leaving at Year 10 and enrolling straight away in a certificate of general education in TAFE. He became unemployed, then started a retail traineeship, became unemployed again and then competed a Jobtrain retail course, working for a big retailer for a year. He was unemployed again for a year before getting work prefabricating buildings, became unemployed, then found kitchen work on a Get Skilled program, before going on the dole for another two years. At the time of the interview, he was completing a Skillshare course in minor building maintenance.

Debbie went to school in Sydney and left in Year 10 when she started work in a children's centre, where she worked for another five years. She then completed her Certificate of Adult Basic Education in Sydney before having her two children and staying at home. When they were old enough for school she started several courses, one in ceramics and others in Aboriginal arts and crafts, with the aim of further developing her artistic skills in order to be able to work from home.

Sally attended various while being in and out of a Catholic orphanage and foster homes. She was expelled from school in her second or third year of high school but after moving once or twice more, left finally at 17 years of age. The next ten years are unclear but include periods of casual work and unemployment. She considered the bridging course run by Curtin University, thinking of entering nursing. This she passed with distinctions. She felt a strong personal goal to 'work with my own people', but also felt that she needed a qualification and also 'wanted to be someone special'. She stuck at the nursing course for two years, but it was away from home and proved to be 'too much too fast' and she dropped out. She then got married and had children.

The **women's stories** tell of their family responsibilities, with older women sometimes moving to get better access to schooling for their children and work for themselves. Younger women seem to combine work, child rearing and study in ways their mothers mostly did not.

May is about 35 years of age. She left school at about fifteen and worked in a meat factory for two years before she got married and had three children. She stayed home for about fifteen years before doing voluntary work in a school support centre and working for the housing co-operative. This brought her to enrol in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island business administration course by block mode.

Tracey grew up in the northwest of NSW, leaving high school at 16 and gaining some training in photographic processing job for a year. She then did various domestic jobs and some factory work, moving to the city and interstate doing crop-picking and other casual jobs. She then raised a family for nearly twenty years before starting a Skillshare course and gaining work experience in a school at the age of forty. She then enrolled in TAFE course for women, and the certificate in general education while helping as a volunteer at the high school homework centre.

Their **mothers or grandmothers** may have spent most of their lives rearing large families from an early age, only returning to formal education and training after many years.

> Born before the war, **Bridget** grew up in Sydney where she went to Catholic schools, leaving at the end of primary in order to look after her brothers and sisters. After doing seasonal work in the bush she married and for the next thirty years raised her large family. At fifty, she decided it was time to resume her education, starting with literacy and numeracy at the local TAFE college, completing the Adult Basic Education and the Adult General Education certificates. She then started university studies in adult education by block release, and she is currently completing her degree.

The desire to stay in community while rearing their families may lead them into liaison work and related kinds of study, with TAFE an access point and stepping stone to later university study. Celia's story shows how some Aboriginal women become active in education and the community from the time they have their own family.

> **Celia** became an Aboriginal education assistant after leaving school, which she 'stuck at' for several years, then did casual fruit picking. She gained a public service job in Canberra but moved home again and had a family. She began several TAFE courses in ceramics and fashion retail for a year and half. Later she did a Skillshare business course, before being selected to work as a community educator and completing the required training course. She has since worked in a number of Aboriginal community liaison and training jobs with government and is currently completing her degree.

For **younger males**, there are opportunities for apprenticeship in 'traditional' male areas such as mechanics. For older men, the choices have often been between unskilled work and the dole, though the development of community organisations has widened the options, sometimes bringing them into vocational education and training for the first time.

> **Jim** is just over twenty. He grew up in a remote Northern Territory community and later attended Catholic schools. Leaving at 15, he went back to the community where he got an apprenticeship on the mission as a mechanic, completing this over the next three years. He then left his job and went back to live in the community.

> **Richard** was born in outback NSW in the nineteen -fifties. His family moved interstate during his schooling and he completed Year 10 in Port Augusta. After school he got a job labouring with the railways, where he remained working operating plant. He took redundancy and then worked as a union representative while working as a plant operator while being unemployed on and off. At this time he felt he faced choices about the future and says after 'talking in the pub' he thought of doing a TAFE course rather than staying on the dole. He decided to make a career in primary health care and work in a rehabilitation centre or nursing. He is completing the TAFE course, and is employed as a youth worker in an Aboriginal community organisation.

Chapter 4 What the research found

The main conclusion was that there are many factors affecting outcomes of participation, and it is important to see how all of these factors are in fact part of a 'human system' of delivery.

The message coming from the interviews suggests strongly that positive VET outcomes are the result of achieving effectiveness in two areas:

- In all it aspects, course delivery is *cross-cultural.*
- Courses focus on both the *cultural appropriateness* of the program and on the *effectiveness* with which the program is delivered.

This chapter highlights outcomes related to two dominant issues:

- Course delivery
- Language and literacy

The next chapter will pick up on these and other key themes and offer Guiding Principles for Course Delivery.

1. Course delivery - many factors

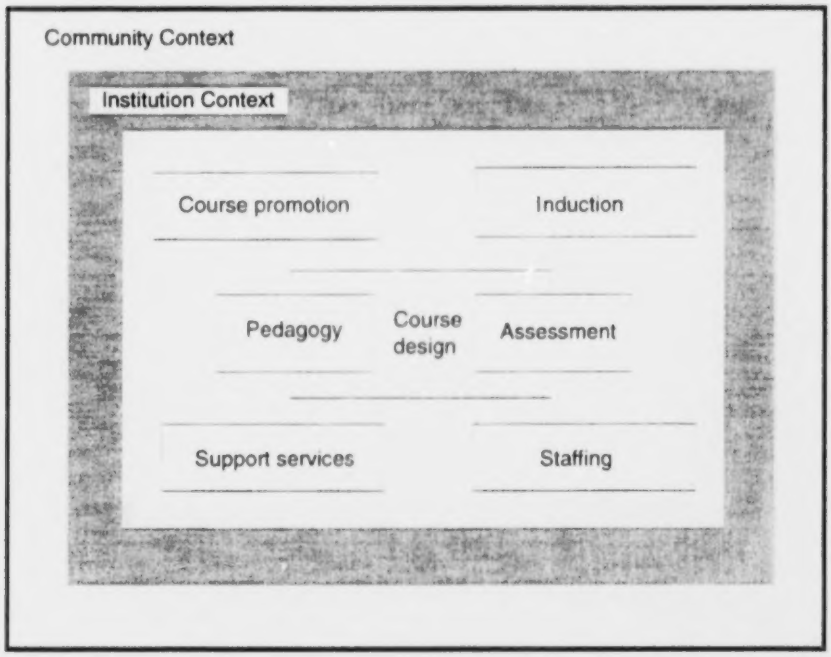
Course delivery is a complex relationship of factors. Each of these factors has to be negotiated with Aboriginal people. These factors include:

- How the institution relates to the community
- How the program is supported by the institution
- How the course delivery is managed to ensure cultural relevance and effectiveness.

This complexity is shown in the following diagram. The heart of course delivery is teaching, learning and assessment - the relationships with students. This heart relates to all other parts of the system including support. All parts must be culturally appropriate.

The course itself is part of the 'institution context' which makes it harder (or easier) to respond well to prospective students in Aboriginal communities who have to see the course as relevant and then decide to participate - the 'community context'.

Course Delivery, Institution and Community



2. Language and literacy - the essential key

Not much is known about the links of literacy with educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, although it is well understood that literacy levels influence the way social advantage and disadvantage are constructed and maintained.

Consequently the project had a strong focus on looking at English language and literacy issues in course delivery.

Following is an outline of the main messages about English language and literacy that came from the learner and institution interviews.

- English literacy and learning is a high priority for learners and institutions
- A balance has to be found between recognising Aboriginal languages and a focus on learning English language and literacy skills.
- There should be an exchange of learning between teachers and indigenous learners:

> *Yet our language needs to be acknowledged and allowed. This year she accepts some Koori English.* (Delya)

They accepted our language verbal but written had to be standard Australian English. (Freda)

- Without this balance, for some learners, there is discontent and shame:

  Lecturers do not take into account the Aboriginal way of saying things. Some students be made to feel shame, anger and be in tears as a result of using Aboriginal words. One lecturer said to one student, 'Could you please explain so we could all understand the secret'. (Loris)

- Entry tasks should be more relevant to a student's experience and the relevance should be explained. Institutions should give more attention to their assessment procedures and to the specific skills that are required for success in a course.

  The readings were on Aboriginal issues that most of use are familiar with. Some found it hard to do, because they hadn't been to school for a long time. Charlotte and Dot said the questions were back to front to them. They're old and they talk different. (Rob)

- Teaching must work with the students' experience and culture. There should be choice and flexibility in how learning is assessed. assessment should take indigenous Australian ways into account.

  More oral as many Kooris have problems in putting information into written form. System promotes one-up-manship which is contrary to Aboriginal ways and patterns of thought. (Dean)

- Greater attempts need to made to meet learners' personal language and literacy goals.

- Academic writing skills need to be learned throughout a course as part of the teaching and learning process.

  I need ongoing support - I'm not sure how to start an essay, then after I have a go I'm not sure how to finish it off. I have problems getting started, researching and pulling out relevant information then constructing the essay.

- Institutions need to be aware about the ELL requirements of a course and how to support learning.

  There's different ways of learning. We'd like more flexibility with subjects and lecturers, not just what's written in books or what the lecturer wants. It has to be more personal. (Arthur)

Chapter 5 Guiding principles for better course delivery

The following key principles were developed as a way to improve course delivery for indigenous Australians. They are illustrated by some of the messages students, teachers and administrators gave to the researchers.

1. Recognise that education and training is a cultural response

Each part of course delivery is a cross-cultural experience for indigenous Australian people. Successful vocational education and training means learning the academic culture of its institutions which may be in conflict with indigenous culture.

> *It made the course so much harder because cultural background wasn't taken into consideration. I found the course very difficult because, in some ways I didn't really know what I was doing. The academic procedures were totally new to me. I had to go over the instructions several times to ensure that I met their deadline. I had no assistance at all, I didn't have any contact. I didn't understand the new kinds of writing. I am not sure if the course could meet my needs.* (Wilma)

Institutions need to recognise the different life and work experiences Aboriginal learners bring to courses. Many indigenous Australians enrol later in life because of their involvement in community work. As a result, when indigenous Australian learners choose a course, community benefit is often considered along with personal goals and employment needs.

> *I wanted to be more competitive in the job market. Improve my career opportunities. I wanted a degree and knowledge that I could use to benefit my community.* (Bob)

Work is closely linked with access for many learners and often leads to associated training. The Koori grapevine is the main way courses are promoted and the most effective way in which students come to relevant courses.

> *The manager of the nursing home is my cousin. He said it was a good course and I'd get training to work there.*

> *I was encouraged as there were other Aboriginal nurses in the hospital.*

It is also clear that first impressions of enrolment can be culturally shocking to new students as they need time to adjust to the academic culture of the course.

> *I was scared of the unexpected - uncomfortable with the teacher. Her expectations were far too high. She didn't take into account that we'd never been to Uni before. We needed to bring up our skills gradually.* (Betty)

2. Make a space for Aboriginality within an institution

Institutions need to accept that effective course delivery recognises Aboriginal culture and identity at every stage of the educational experience. Lack of understanding by staff, for example, can often result in failure and withdrawal.

> *More explanation about what they want. More teaching in all the learning areas, like kinaesthetic, hearing and seeing. I need things explained in different ways. She thinks we should understand things that are simple, but when we've never done them before, we don't know what to do and we feel stupid - like we should know.* (Tracey)

The involvement of Aboriginal teaching administrators, teachers, tutors and support staff is clearly appreciated:

> *The Aboriginal Unit needs to have more support staff so that the Aboriginal coordinator is able to do their job without being everything to everyone. The expectation placed on the Aboriginal coordinator is enormous.* (Clare)

> *We have Aboriginal lecturers - for the non-Aboriginal lecturers we've taught them. It's been a two-way learning.* (Celia)

Learners want Aboriginal perspectives in course content for Aboriginal *and* non-Aboriginal students and they strongly support the maintenance of the block mode of delivery:

> *Block release is very much to my style of learning. going back to study after twenty years and meeting other people.* (Stewart)

Participants give a high value to studying together, and to Aboriginal units in universities.

> *Being part of an all-Koori group gave me confidence in that setting to express myself .* (Noni)

> *The support of Aboriginal Units in tertiary education is crucial to Aboriginal student's access and retention.* (Noeline)

A need for the dedication of physical spaces for the display of cultural artefacts was also expressed as an important way to make a space for Aboriginal culture.

> *From the top down an Aboriginal 'presence' to make it more appealing through artefacts, paintings murals about the campus* (Nathan)

3. Involve Aboriginal communities in course delivery

Aboriginal communities must be involved in course design to ensure more positive outcomes. There is also a need for Aboriginal teaching staff and the involvement of indigenous Australian peoples in learning experiences.

By framing the content of the course in terms of Aboriginal perspectives delivery will be more culturally inclusive.

> *I don't think it was really structured for Aboriginal people...A lot of us are quite smart and cluey but the course needs to be adapted to suit black fellas* (Sally)

> *They don't understand Aboriginal politics. What might work in their world doesn't work in our world, and they tell us we're wrong.* (Charlie)

Effective cross-cultural communication is needed to bring this about. Other factors such as staffing, induction and support will influence course design. Any type of delivery can involve a trade-off of these factors for students. The block mode, for example, may be valued for its support services but it does take the student away from home and community support thus adding pressure. For local study the reverse is true.

4. Be flexible and negotiate appropriate teaching and learning

Where indigenous Australian peoples are acquiring non-Aboriginal knowledge the processes should be negotiated if they are to be culturally appropriate. The research shows how much this negotiation is recognised as an important part of delivery. This is a process of accommodation to the requirements of the students by the institution and vice versa. **Courses should highlight that learning involves moving between two cultures.** This is an important understanding of educational culture and is a strong recommendation.

> *The whole course was based on talking, reading and writing. The whole process is valid in the Aboriginal community. Aboriginal peoples' history is an oral history. This is still the best way of teaching Aboriginals today* (Provider)

> *As an educationalist, am I doing the right thing by my students? I try to put the students first and be sensitive to their needs and interests. The course must be culturally relevant and culturally appropriate for them.* (Provider)

Students want to negotiate course requirements with staff particularly when commitments to family, community and work may create personal difficulties.

> *The staff are quite empathetic towards the students as they do take an active interest in the trials and tribulations of student life. Teachers in this unit are friendly and supportive.* (May)

Teachers can draw on the experiences of their students in relation to work or community issues in teaching a subject. This is especially the case when many students are older with a store of relevant life experiences.

> *Mature age students have a collective of relevant life and professional experiences, thereby intimidating lecturers.* (Nathan)

Greater flexibility with subjects and negotiation of tasks and task variety is needed. Assessment should also be flexible.

> *We all put in or own ideas to negotiate assessment, but all agreed on a particular project for assessment in a certain time frame.* (Debbie)

Staffing is clearly an issue. The institution interviews indicate the high expectations Aboriginal students have of their teachers. It found teachers who were non-judgmental, supportive, patient and open to learning from students, were most appreciated. This underlines the implications of the research that quality learning must be genuinely two-way.

> *I think they tried to understand, but I don't think they really knew how. They just tried to be friendly, but I found this patronising.* (Charlie)

5. Recognise that a range of support is needed

Several types of support are important for indigenous people, especially in tutoring, counselling, learning and assessment strategies and integrated study skills. Family and community support is essential to continuing participation and successful work.

> *Teacher's and friends and family encouraged me when things got tough.* (Jack)

> *My pathway has been a positive experience with the support from Aboriginal support structures. It gave me the safe environment to work from.* (Paul)

6. Make language and literacy part of course delivery

(For further detail see previous chapter)

Gains in English language and literacy must occur in all courses where academic skills are necessary. This means language and literacy learning must be built into vocational courses, not only be taught in 'preparatory' and general courses. A balance has to be found between recognising Aboriginal languages and a focus on learning English language and literacy skills.

> *It is just expected that you have those types of skills to do the course. We have to pull up lecturers about the type of language they use. Although we think that this should be built into the course outline because Aboriginals still don't have access to this type of language.* (Celia)

The issue of language and literacy is one area where culture conflict is keenly felt by participants, and appropriate learning is a high priority for learners and institutions.

> *We appreciate the huge focus on the need to be literate in academic language and standard language.*

7. Evaluate the effectiveness of each part of the system of course delivery

Institutions must understand that effectiveness depends not just on evaluating each aspect of the system of delivery but acting on the evaluation to ensure necessary changes are made. The processes of delivery refer not only to course design, teaching and assessment but also to the effective management of course promotion, entry and induction, staffing and professional and support services.

> *We are pressured by attendance issues. There is not a great deal of flexibility. We cannot give much consideration to the home and family life of the students.* (Provider).

It is important for institutions to learn (usually from experience) to accept only those students who will really benefit from the course and provide bridging and counselling services to ensure that the applicants can match the demands placed on them.

> We don't exclude any students if they are not suited to the course. We refer them on to something more suitable. TAFE, a University preparation course or Aboriginal orientation course. *(Provider).*

Chapter 6 What did the report recommend?

A number of recommendations for government bodies and educational institutions came out of this research about actions to improve VET for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

The recommendations are:

1. That institutions and educators adopt the concept of *course delivery as a cross-cultural activity* as a way of developing better programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

   That the 'guiding principles' described in this report be used in implementing a cross-cultural approach to vocational education and training for indigenous Australians. These principles were:

   (a) Recognise that vocational education and training is a cultural activity.

   (b) Make a space for Aboriginality within the institution

   (c) Involve Aboriginal communities in course design and delivery.

   (d) Negotiate culturally appropriate teaching-learning processes.

   (e) Recognise that staffing and support issues are crucial to culturally appropriate delivery.

   (f) Make relevant language and literacy learning integral to course delivery

   (g) Evaluate the effectiveness of each part of the system of course delivery

2. That when VET providers design courses for indigenous Australians, they recognise the complex 'systems' nature of course delivery, and aim to achieve *cultural appropriateness* at each step of course delivery. In particular, attention should be given to (a) *negotiating* appropriate procedures with indigenous Australians and (b) *evaluating* the effectiveness of procedures in each of the following aspects -

   (a) *Course promotion*, recognising positive 'word of mouth' evaluation can increase community support for a course

   (b) *Induction* procedures, especially enrolment, which should anticipate the cultural difficulties of students

(c) *Course design*, which should provide Aboriginal perspectives on non-Aboriginal content and use culturally relevant materials so that students are able to move between cultures, relating different knowledges and competencies to each other

(d) *Teaching and learning*, where flexibility and cultural responsiveness is valued by learners, who say learning is more effective when it is negotiated, collaborative and experiential

(e) *Assessment*, where learners and providers both recommend flexibility, choice and cultural relevance in how learning is assessed

(f) *Support*, which should include a range of strategies including supportive teaching of academic skills, peer learning in groups and support services such as tutoring, personal counselling, study skills courses and support from family and community.

(g) *Staffing*, which should give preference to recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander teaching staff, or other staff selected for experience in working with indigenous Australians.

3. That, VET providers give more attention to a range of language and literacy issues in course delivery, and in particular -

(a) In acknowledgment of the significance of English language and literacy there is a need for more explicit descriptions of -

- English language and literacy requirements for entry into a course;
- English language and literacy involved in the teaching and learning process in the course;
- the expected English language and literacy outcomes of a course.

(b) In acknowledgment of the need for teaching and learning processes to work with the learners' experiences and culture, while maintaining engagement with the learning of English language and literacy, there is a need for:

- staff recruitment criteria to reflect the valuing of specific skills and experiences that address the complex cultural and language issues involved in the design and delivery of VET provision for indigenous learners;

- professional development activities that focus on the cultural and language dimensions of all aspects of VET provision for indigenous learners;

(c) In order to support the development of high levels of English language and literacy competence, English language and literacy need to be integrated into all aspects of the teaching and learning process.

(d) Institutions need to put into place processes for the evaluation of course and pedagogical initiatives that have been established to assist in the development of English language and literacy.

(e) Providers should support the inclusion in VET teacher education programs of a focus on language, literacy and learning in VET.

4. That VET authorities and providers, consult with appropriate indigenous Australian organisations regarding the development of professional development strategies, which might include -

(a) the development of competencies in managing cross-cultural training for VET managers

(b) identification of competencies for VET practitioners in the area of cross-cultural training, including competencies in the language and literacy domain, for those engaged in course delivery with Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander students

(c) appropriate curriculum development to better meet the needs of Australian indigenous communities, particularly where VET is delivered in the community

(d) employment of indigenous Australian educators to develop and implement cross-cultural training

5. That, in consultation with relevant indigenous Australian organisations, mechanisms be put in place to ensure the ongoing evaluation of the different aspects of course delivery systems, particularly the effectiveness of -

(a) preparatory courses in preparing learners for the next stage in their learning, and

(b the range of support services provided within institutions, including Aboriginal Study Units, Study Skills Units, and the use of tutors for individual or small group work

6. That future research give a high priority to research approaches that are consistent with principles of self-determination, including those which develop indigenous Australians research skills in Aboriginal-

controlled projects, collaborative research processes and community-based inquiry.

7. That the following future directions for research on the outcomes of participation of indigenous Australians be considered in consultation with appropriate Aboriginal consultative bodies -

   (a) Case studies of effective systems of delivery of courses to Aboriginal communities, examining in particular ways in which communities establish relationships with institutions and the issues they face in achieving cultural appropriate delivery and quality in course delivery

   (b) Inquiry into the ways institutions can achieve closer collaboration with indigenous Australian communities

   (c) The outcomes of participation for Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander students attending VET courses that are not specifically designed for them

   (d) Evaluation of the effectiveness of 'bridging' courses and employment programs

   (e) In the area of language and literacy, examination of the use of Aboriginal languages in the classroom, and of the effectiveness of different kinds of language and literacy support

   (f) Given that this project has focussed on issues of delivery 'within' institutions, investigation of the effectiveness of community-based provision of VET courses.

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